

Gaps in Kennedy Autopsy Files

Panel Says Secrecy Has Caused Distrust; Missing Notes, Photos

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Notes taken at the autopsy of President John F. Kennedy by one of the examining physicians apparently disappeared that night, and the whereabouts of previously unknown photographs of Kennedy's wounds remain a mystery, according to medical records and testimony.

The Kennedy Assassination Records Review Board made the documents public Friday with an extraordinary staff report underscoring the shortcomings of the autopsy performed on Kennedy at Bethesda Naval Hospital here on Nov. 22, 1963.

Kennedy was killed hours earlier in Dallas that day and his body was brought to Washington after a vain effort to save him at Dallas's Parkland Memorial Hospital. Three doctors performed the autopsy at Bethesda without calling the treating physicians in Texas for guidance.

"One of the many tragedies of the assassination of President Kennedy has been the incompleteness of the autopsy record and the suspicion caused by the shroud of secrecy that has surrounded the records that do exist," the review board said in the staff report. "[T]he legacy of such secrecy ultimately has caused distrust and suspicion."

In an effort to compile a more complete record of the autopsy, the review board sought out additional

witnesses and found, among others, Dr. Leonard D. Saslaw, a biochemist who recalled a loud lunchroom conversation between one of the autopsy physicians, Dr. Pierre A. Finck, and colleagues at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, days after the assassination.

Saslaw, who was sitting at the next table, said "Dr. Finck was loudly lamenting the fact that the notes he had taken during the course of the autopsy on President Kennedy had disappeared, and that he had been forced to reconstruct his notes from memory."

"Dr. Finck complained," Saslaw told the board in an April 1996 interview, "that immediately after cleaning up following the conclusion of the autopsy, he looked for his notes and could not find them anywhere; and that even though others who had been at the autopsy had helped him search, that they could not be found."

Saslaw remembered Finck going on to say in angry tones that he had been forced as a result to reconstruct his notes from memory after the autopsy was over. Saslaw said he was struck by the conversation because he was well aware as a scientist that "any observations which are not written down contemporaneously, but reconstructed from memory after the fact, are not likely to be as accurate or complete."

Asked about the lunchroom episode in a May 1996 deposition, Finck said he did not remember it. He was

also vague about how many notes he took during the autopsy but confirmed that "after the autopsy I also wrote notes" and that he turned over whatever notes he had to the chief autopsy physician, Dr. James J. Humes.

It has long been known that Humes destroyed some original autopsy papers in a fireplace at his home on Nov. 24, 1963. He told the Warren Commission that what he burned was an original draft of his autopsy report. Under persistent questioning at a February 1996 deposition by the Review Board, Humes said he destroyed the draft and his "original notes."

Asked whether he remembered Finck taking any notes during the autopsy, Humes said: "I do not. I don't say he didn't, but I don't recall that he did."

"This is bizarre," said assassination researcher and author David Lifton, whose work led the board to Saslaw. "All these papers disappearing or destroyed."

Other new witnesses dealt with photographs believed to have been taken at Bethesda by the late White House photographer Robert L. Knudsen, perhaps after the autopsy had been concluded and the embalming procedure had begun.

Saundra K. Spencer, who worked for Knudsen in "the White House lab" at the Naval Photographic Center in 1963, said she helped develop color negatives from film brought to

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her by an agent she thought was with the FBI.

"He said that they had been shot at Bethesda and they were autopsy pictures," Spencer testified in a June 1997 deposition. The agent told "us to process them and try to not observe too much, don't peruse."

Shown official autopsy photographs of Kennedy from the National Archives, Spencer said they were not the ones she helped process and were printed on different paper. She said "there was no blood or opening cavities" and the wounds were much smaller in the pictures she worked on, unlike in usual autopsy photos. "It was quite reverent in how they handled it."

Knudsen's widow, Gloria, and two of his children said he told them he had "photographed the autopsy of President Kennedy" and that "it was the hardest thing he ever had to do in his life." He also told them that "the Secret

Service took the film from him as soon as he had exposed" it.

John T. Stringer, who said he was the only one to take photos during the autopsy itself, said some of those were missing as well. He said that pictures he took of Kennedy's brain at a "supplementary autopsy" were different from the official set that was shown to him.

Stringer said he "gave everything" he photographed during the brain examination to Humes who then gave the film to Kennedy's personal physician, the late Adm. George Burkley. According to Humes, Burkley left the hospital with Kennedy's brain, saying that he was going to "deliver it to [Attorney General] Robert Kennedy," presumably for burial.